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## When Godliness Made Peace with Cleanliness

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American immune system is in serious trouble. A study released this year showed a 50% rise from 1997 to 2011 in the incidence of food allergies among children, with a whopping 69% rise in eczema sufferers. The only kids apparently not itching and sneezing were those living on farms and in other insalubrious places.



The idea that we've become too clean for our own health will come as a shock to a nation that spends billions on personal hygiene products. Yet it seems as though our malodorous ancient forebears were on to something.

Visitors to the U.K. are often peeved to discover that the only place where water is in short supply is the British bathroom. Some wonder whether this is another example of English backwardness, like warm

beer and crooked teeth. But according to Ferdinand Mount's "Full Circle," British bathing habits date back to the Christian Fathers, who rejected the fragrant oils and rose petals baths of the Romans in favor of the more earthy scents of parfum de foot and cologne au naturel.

St. Jerome (347-circa 420) declared to the faithful: "He who has once bathed in Christ has no need of a second bath." Faith, in his opinion, was a greater purifier than mere water. Christian ascetics took this literally and never bathed at all. By the sixth century, Christian attitudes to bathing had become more relaxed. Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) accepted that there were times when a bath might be necessary. But on no account was it to be enjoyed, lest it become an opportunity "for the titillation of the mind and for sensuous pleasure." Gregory's strictures faded once the Crusaders, camping outside Jerusalem, discovered the delights of a lavender-infused steam bath followed by a plunge into the cold pool.

During the Middle Ages, Northern Europeans took to washing with gusto. The Emperor Charlemagne (died 814) would frequently invite his friends and relations to bathe with him in the royal bathhouse. But Southern Europeans, especially the Spanish, maintained a cautious attitude. Unable to persuade the Moors to cease their repellent habit of daily bathing, in 1492 Ferdinand V and Isabella presided over the destruction of the exquisite public baths, known as hammams, that were once the pride of the Iberian peninsula.

It was not until the 19th century that the last vestiges of anti-ablutionism were laid to rest. Having decreed that cleanliness was next to Godliness, the Victorians used the power of mass-production to convert the rest of Europe to

their cause. Suddenly, it was a brave new world of disposable toothbrushes, packaged toilet paper and deodorant in a jar. For a brief moment, hygiene was the lingua franca of humanity.

The unity of the washing world ended in 1880, when Thomas Campbell of New Brunswick, Canada, received a patent for the mixer faucet. Americans quickly converted to single taps, leaving the Europeans to their old-fashioned hot and cold spouts.

Other differences followed. It was the French who developed the modern shower, for use in prisons and army barracks. But it was Yankee know-how that figured out a way to turn the trickles of water in the European version into the pulsating blasts of the power shower. By the mid-20th century, the added luxury of heated towels rails, his-and-hers sinks, separate shower stalls and eventually Jacuzzi baths made the American bathroom a tourist attraction in its own right.

Some bathing stalwarts may resist the new directive to go dirty. But they should recall the words of G.K. Chesterton, who argued that "man does not live by soap alone" and "hygiene, or even health, is not much good unless you...feel a healthy indifference to it."

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